

An Address to a Meeting of the
Young Environmental Professionals

National Roundtable for the Economy and the Environment (NRTEE)
Board Room, 344 Slater Street, Suite 200
April 13, 2005

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Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Bonsoir, Mesdames et Messieurs. I thank you all, and I thank David Schwartz in particular, for the honour of your invitation. It is a great pleasure to be part of your gathering tonight.

It is a pleasure not least because you and I share a strong affinity of purpose—the purpose of transforming knowledge into public policy. I know this is a commitment of environmental professionals: to advance environmental science, in its broadest meaning, and to apply that knowledge in ways that inform effective and sustainable policy.

And that is a commitment embedded in the mandate of my own organization, the International Development Research Centre. IDRC was created by Parliament in 1970, specifically to promote research for development in developing countries—and expressly to foster better lives and living standards for poor people in those countries.

Like most of you, IDRC operates at the intersection of knowledge generation and policy formation. And we try to strengthen connections between the two, supporting research useful to policy and encouraging policy soundly rooted in the best available knowledge.

This is not easy work, as you well know. To bring that point home, I only have to say the words “Kyoto Protocol.” Nowhere is it harder to transform evidence-based knowledge into policy than in mitigating and adapting to climate change.

In the first place, our understanding of climate change dynamics remains demandingly incomplete. And in the second place, the politics of making policy for climate change—even in rich countries like our own—can be fiercely difficult.

Much has been said about the absence of developing countries from the Kyoto Protocol rules, and I will be frank with you about this. It is my belief that poor countries ought to sign up to Kyoto Protocol obligations, for their own good. The so-called moral argument for exempting developing countries from Kyoto—We Southerners deserve our chance to wreck the world now that you Northerners have had yours—is transparently self-serving.

Furthermore, like many self-serving arguments, this one is bound to prove self-destructive. The truth is—and here the evidence accumulates daily—poor countries, and the poorest people in poor countries, are more exposed to the harms of climate change than anyone else on the planet.

To begin with, poor people in poor countries tend to rely on the most climate-sensitive sectors of any economy: farming, fishing, and forestry among them. As well, they commonly inhabit the most vulnerable ecosystems—low-lying coastlines, deltas and river shores, deserts and near-deserts, and landscapes threatened by erosion and the other dangers of extreme weathers.

And finally, the lives of poor people in poor countries are defined by their lack of choices—and by the severity of the insecurities that already afflict them. By one estimate, some 96 per cent of all disaster-related deaths in recent years have occurred in developing countries.

Cela fait bien ressortir, comme d'autres l'ont souligné, que tous les risques associés aux changements climatiques viennent se superposer aux risques épouvantables auxquels les populations pauvres font déjà face—et que, la plupart du temps, elles ne peuvent pas éviter facilement.

In short, most people in developing countries have a real and urgent interest in the success of the mitigation regime at the core of the Kyoto Protocol. And in the meantime, they share a pressing interest in adapting to climate change as safely, efficiently and fairly as possible.

But that only states the problem, not the solution. Formulating effective and sustainable climate change policy compels the people of those countries both to generate the evidence to inform good policy in their own circumstances, and then to make and carry out that policy.

We Canadians are learning as we go the uncertainties in the science and the policy-making. These difficulties are much more testing in poor countries, where capacities for research—and for governance—are typically weak and often overstretched.

Et c'est ici que se posent les questions qui sont au coeur même du travail du CRDI : comment les pays pauvres peuvent-ils trouver et rassembler les données probantes qui les aideront à mieux comprendre ce qui est véritablement dans leur intérêt et comment peuvent-ils transposer ces données en des politiques judicieuses et en de bonnes pratiques ?

Let me use the next few minutes to explore findings we have reached in 35 years of field work at IDRC. The first set of conclusions has to do with designing and doing research. The second set can teach researchers how to influence policy.

The first conclusions focus on the unique value—often, the indispensable necessity—of community participation in development research. Throughout the developing world, IDRC and our partners have repeatedly demonstrated how community participation in the design, execution and evaluation of research can pay dividends in knowledge creation and in policy formation.

On an Amazon tributary, for example, IDRC has supported research into mercury poisoning among local villagers. The starting assumption was that mercury was leaching into the water—and into the fish that villagers eat—from nearby gold mining operations. The surprising discovery was that most mercury contamination originated in local soils, and was entering the river because of the villagers' own slash-and-burn agriculture. That discovery, and the solutions, emerged in a close collaboration of Canadian and Brazilian scientists with the women and men of those riverbanks.

The science was all the more reliable, and the responses sustainable, because the community was engaged as full participants throughout.

Sur le littoral cambodgien, par ailleurs, les travaux que le CRDI a appuyés sur la gestion participative des ressources des mangroves se sont vite orientés vers les liens entre la gestion des ressources au niveau des villages et la culture politique cambodgienne. Dans ce cas, les villageois ont fait d'énormes progrès—aussi bien dans la protection de l'écosystème des mangroves que dans la répartition des coûts et des avantages de cette protection entre les pêcheurs, les coupeurs de bois et les autres personnes tributaires de la santé vigoureuse des mangroves.

But Cambodia remains a highly hierarchical political system—where high-level political support turns out to be essential even for the most local of resource-management undertakings. As a result, the research management team itself came to serve as something of a bridge between the powerless and the powerful. Activities as simple as arranging local visits by the Canadian ambassador to Cambodia, or tours by a provincial governor, proved crucial to establishing the legitimacy and survival of the newly-formed local resource management regime.

Returning for a moment to climate change: IDRC has identified the environmental and poverty implications of climate change as a priority in our programming for 2005-2010. And we are specifically stressing community and policy responses to the imperatives of adaptation.

In a project just getting under way in India, we are working with the International Institute for Sustainable Development, and The Energy and Resources Institute of India, to assess how agriculture and water policies facilitate local adaptations. For a start, the project will choose two sites—one in India, the other on the Canadian Prairies—where drought is already a concern. From beginning to end, the project is designed to engage both local communities and policy-makers in a shared enterprise of science and policy analysis.

Such projects illustrate just as strongly the second set of conclusions that I will address briefly: the critical role for researchers (and their allies) in the messy and uncertain processes of policy-making. To put it bluntly, scholars and research professionals must become far smarter, and more active, as participants in the policy process.

I recognize the impediments, the familiar dichotomy between science and policy. Science looks to the long term, contemplates ambiguity and contingency, and measures progress with slow caution. Policy wants fast answers, gets impatient with complexity and equivocation, and usually prefers action to reflection.

Au demeurant, nombreux sont les scientifiques et les intellectuels qui ressentent tout simplement un malaise, et même du mépris ou de la crainte, face à la confusion et aux compromis qui accompagnent le processus d'élaboration démocratique des politiques.

But science, to have beneficial influence on policy, must work around these impediments. And it can be done.

It is done when science makes and nourishes lasting personal relationships inside the policy community. It is done by speaking to policy in words that policy understands, addressing problems that policy-makers actually recognize as important. It is done by opportunism—preparing for, and seizing, every chance for influence when it arises.

And finally, science has to attend to the deadly-serious politics of policy-making—the rival interests at work, and the opportunities for creative accommodation. Indeed, this is frequently where science (including social science) can make its most transformative contribution—by generating and presenting new knowledge that itself dramatically alters the policy question, and opens new ground for agreement. More than once, in the development setting, good research has reframed a policy dispute just by dispelling a contentious superstition with a few welcome facts.

With that hopeful observation I will stop. I know you have your own experiences in these issues, and I look forward now to hearing some of your own thoughts.

Thank you. Merci.